An Interview with Farhad Saba, Founder of

Distance-Educator.com

Farhad Saba is a well-known professional in the world of distance education. He is one of the true pioneers in the field, having been involved in distance education since 1973, first as the Managing Director of Educational Radio and Television of Iran (1973-1978), and then as the Director of the Telecommunications Division at the University of Connecticut (1979-1984).

Currently Saba is Professor of Educational Technology at San Diego State University (1984-present), where he teaches courses on distance education, and cyberculture. He is also the founder of Distance-Educator.com, which is a popular online news and information resource for distance education practitioners.

His consulting work has included many corporations and public institutions, including Apple Computer Inc., Digital Equipment Corporation (merged with Hewlett-Packard through Compaq), Nortel, the U. S. Department of Education, Harvard Business School Publishing, the Office of the Governor of the State of Connecticut, the Office of the Chancellor of the California State University System, the World Bank and the San Diego County Office of Education.

Recently, Educational Pathways (EP) interviewed Saba to get a general sense of his viewpoints on what he refers to as the "postmodern" practice of distance education.

EP: It seems that a "Tower- of-Babel" effect has grown in relation to the terminology used to define and discuss distance education. We read and hear about distance education being referred to as "distance learning," "online learning," "asynchronous learning networks," "distributed learning," "Web-based learning," "elearning," the list goes on . . . What's your opinion about this confusion of terms?

Saba: The terminology in the theoretical literature of distance education is very clear. The field has more than 40 years of organized theoretical literature in which terms have been defined operationally, and measurable variables have been introduced to study them.

In recent years, many new practitioners have joined the field who, simply did not bother to look at the literature. So, when they came across something that was new to them, they simply ascribed a new name to the phenomenon that was unfamiliar to them. Therefore, you see a conceptual confusion in the lay literature.

Editor's note: See "The Year Ahead: 'Conceptual Confusion' in Distance Education," inside the **Saba's Corner** *link at www.distance-educator.com.*

EP: What kind of misinformation should distance educators be aware of?

Saba: In our age of instant media communication, it is not only up to those who are looking for valid and reliable information about distance education, but for information in any subject, to be discerning consumers. When reading about the field, it is a good idea to ask who wrote the article, what are his/her credentials and how was the article written? Is it data-based and theory-driven or just based on data without regard for theory? How was the data analyzed? How were the conclusions made? Did the analysis meet the critical criteria expected in a scholarly work?

In looking through many articles each week, I see that most of the articles published are based on the personal conjectures of the author. Very few articles are informed by carefully collected data when such data collection and analysis is informed by theory. So, we have a situation now that the majority of published information in the field consists of uninformed opinion.

EP: We continuously hear how student-to-student "interaction" in the online classroom is a vital key to creating positive learning outcomes. Do you subscribe to this notion of interaction being a key to success? What kind of strategies do faculty need to be aware of when it comes to facilitating significant interaction inside their online courses?

Saba: The research that I have conducted on the subject over the years is very clear about this matter. Simply put, each learner requires a certain amount of dialog and structure to succeed. The amount varies for each student. Some learners are comfortable with a high amount of structure (low dialog); while others require high dialog (low structure). The problem arises when institutions and faculty forget that distance education is a postmodern practice, and does not lend itself to modern practices.

Modernism was about standardization. Its objective was to make sure that one size would fit all. Postmodern practices are about fulfilling individual needs.

Distance in education is therefore defined by the requisite dialog and required structure. Its level differs for each student, subject matter and other variables involved. The "transaction" between the student and the instructor determines the level of dialog and structure at each moment in time during a course of instruction.

EP: It often seems that faculty are being thrown into distance education without being adequately trained. For example, many new distance education faculty may only get a short online course, or a few face-to-face seminars or meetings before being, so to speak, thrown into a sink or swim situation. What kind of training do new distance education faculty really need in order to be properly equipped for teaching in this environment?

Saba: Well, faculty, usually do not have any training whatsoever to teach in conventional education either. So, why would anyone think that they need special training for distance education? The dirty little secret is that teaching in higher education has been a craft oriented profession. Each faculty has had his or her style and strategy for teaching. It has been a pre-modern practice.

Distance education is a postmodern practice. This means that it requires a certain level of standardization before faculty can exert their individual styles with confidence and respond to the individual needs of their learners with assurance.

To achieve that level of modern standardization, faculty need to know about pedagogy and technology. There are no requirements for faculty to have this knowledge at the present time. Faculty are hired and promoted everyday who are not aware of any pedagogical principles, and they are not familiar with instructional technology even for classroom teaching, let alone for distance teaching and learning.

Another aspect of this problem is that in modern institutions there is a division of labor. Modernism, in part, is defined by a division of labor.

Again, teaching in higher education is in a pre-modern stage of development. So, there are no instructional designers, programmers, graphic designers, videographers, marketing experts, etc. helping faculty to teach a course. Can you imagine if a Detroit auto worker was asked to design a car, build it single handedly, ship it, market it, etc.?

Finally, why would any faculty lend his or her time to further training - to have the privilege of teaching the same number of students with more complicated means? See, distance education is a system of interrelated parts. Faculty are just one part of that system, albeit an important part. When there are parts that are missing, you cannot just dump additional tasks on facultys' shoulders and blame them for not having the training to perform those tasks. Faculty development would work, only when other parts of the system are in place. No matter how much training you offer faculty, he or she cannot compensate for a good programmer, or a graphic designer; as a pilot, for example, cannot compensate for an air traffic controller even with additional training.

EP: There's always discussion going on about course management systems (CMS). Is it feasible to build your own CMS? Which one is better: Blackboard, WebCT, eCollege, Angel, IntraLearn, etc.? Which has the best customer support? What do distance educators and administrators really need to understand about course management systems?

Saba: I designed my own and built it with the assistance of a very talented student who is now a colleague at Distance-Educator.com. At the time, there were no course management (or learning management) systems in the market, and I was teaching about the subject. So, I had to create my own solution. But you cannot expect a faculty in history, geology or math to build his or her own system. That is just not feasible.

A complete response to your question, however, requires at least a chapter in a book, if not a complete book. There are many variables that are involved in selecting CMSs. We offer guidelines on Distance-Educator.com for such selections. We also publish new information about products, and product upgrades in the Daily News, so professionals can make informed decisions.

EP: Research shows that distance education can be just as good or better than traditional education. What would you say are the most important elements for producing a truly effective and meaningful distance education experience?

Saba: The variables are numerous. But at the highest level of design, the most important element is the extent to which a course, or an instructional module can respond to a learner's individual need for dialog and structure. These are the variables for which we have solid data and theoretical confirmation.

For further information on this please, see: Saba, F. , & Shearer, R. L. (1994). Verifying key theoretical concepts in a dynamic model of distance education. The American Journal of Distance Education, 8 (1), 36-59.

EP: How do you see libraries fitting into the distance education experience? What role should academic libraries play in the development of distance education programs?

Saba: This is also a huge subject on which books have been written. In a nutshell, libraries play a central role in individualizing learning for students. I am not sure if they see their role as such. I have seen some librarians who have become instructional designers, and are helping faculty to organize their course content. That may be necessary in the short to mid range, but in the long run librarians have to realize that learning is a self-organized human activity, and to the point that they can make this self-organization possible for the learners they are going to succeed.

EP: What do administrators need to know about the cost of developing and maintaining distance education programs?

Saba: Again, this is another major topic that requires chapters, if not volumes, to discuss. In short, they need to find out why education is the only human institution in which the introduction of technology has not brought down the cost of individuals served. In education, in most cases, we have managed to do the same old thing with more expensive means! In many distance education operations that I have examined, significant elements of a successful system are missing. Therefore, contrary to what was believed a few years ago, distance education has not brought down the cost of education, let alone turn in a profit.

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This article can be found at: http://www.edpath.com/sabainterview.htm